

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard

(also called The Parable of the Generous Employer)

(Matthew 20: 1-16) Good News Bible

“The Kingdom of heaven is like this. Once there was a man who went out early in the morning to hire some men to work in his vineyard. He agreed to pay them the regular wage, a silver coin a day, and sent them to work in his vineyard. He went out again to the market place at nine o’clock and saw some men standing there doing nothing, so he told them, ‘You also go and work in the vineyard, and I will pay you a fair wage.’ So they went. Then at twelve o’clock and again at three o’clock he did the same thing. It was nearly five o’clock when he went to the market place and saw some other men still standing there. ‘Why are you wasting the whole day here doing nothing?’ he asked them. ‘No one hired us,’ they answered. ‘Well, then, you also go and work in the vineyard,’ he told them.

When evening came, the owner told his foreman, ‘Call the workers and pay them their wages, starting with those who were hired last and ending with those who were hired first.’ The men who had begun to work at five o’clock were paid a silver coin each. So when the men who were the first to be hired came to be paid, they thought they would get more; but they too were given a silver coin each. They took their money and started grumbling against the employer. ‘These men who were hired last worked only one hour,’ they said, ‘while we put up with a whole day’s work in the hot sun - yet you paid them the same as you paid us!’

‘Listen, friend,’ the owner answered one of them, ‘I have not cheated you. After all, you agreed to do a day’s work for one silver coin. Now take your pay and go home. I want to give this man who was hired last as much as I have given you. Don’t I have the right to do as I wish with my own money? Or are you jealous because I am generous?’”

And Jesus concluded, "So those who are last will be first, and those who are first will be last."

This parable is mainly about generosity, offering a glimpse of God's splendid response to our good actions. We all know generosity is a virtue worth having, yet we may find ourselves reacting in the same way as the first hired men in this story. It is easy to recognise generosity when it is directed at us. It is also easy to recognise it when it is directed at others, but we were not expecting anything. However, it is difficult to recognize generosity when it is directed at others and we were indeed expecting something, something which was not given.

We have five sets of labourers in this parable, who began work at 6.00am, 9.00am, 12.00pm, 3.00pm and 5.00pm respectively. In other translations of the Bible, it is stated as being early in the morning, at about the third hour, the sixth hour, the ninth hour, and about the eleventh hour. This is based on a 12-hour working day, but also on the Jewish daytime hours which began with dawn and ended with sundown. Thus, the eleventh hour – five o'clock – is nearly the end of the working day. At the end of the story – at sundown or the twelfth hour – all the labourers were paid, and they received the same amount exactly: one silver coin, which was in those days the usual daily wage for a labourer.

In this parable, the owner of the vineyard can be seen to represent God. And we know that God is utterly and unconditionally generous. He doesn't give in return of certain goods or hours of work toiled. He is not a trader. He gives to everyone who behaves lovingly and works for the kingdom of God, and he doesn't keep an hour log or a work registry.

The last men the landowner found at about five o'clock were the ones nobody wanted to hire. It is not explained in this parable why nobody wanted them. Perhaps they were the drunkards, the crazy, the disabled, the old... who knows! Either way they were mistrusted and rejected, and nobody offered them work.

Many scholars have raised questions about these workers. Who are the eleventh-hour workers of our day? Could it be the people who are despised by society, or are they the deathbed converts? In other interpretations, the early labourers are identified as the Jews in those days, and the latecomers as the Gentiles who arrived much later to God but were welcomed and treated as equals in God's kingdom.

I do not think it is vital to answer these questions to understand the parable. Jesus didn't clearly state it but left it open. This is an interesting thing about parables, they leave things open – open for us to fill in the gaps. In other words, the eleventh-hour workers could depict many of us. It could be the rejected, the abandoned and despised, or those who find God late in life, or perhaps another group which hasn't been stated here. It does not matter. We should leave it open, as it was intended.

The only thing we know for sure, regarding these eleventh-hour workers, is the question the landowner puts to them. In other translations of the Bible, such as the King James Version, it reads:

“Why stand ye here all day idle?”

And their succinct reply:

“Because no man hath hired us.”

With that response the workers indicated their willingness to work. They were not idle because they refused to work. It was not laziness or apathy, but the fact that nobody had offered them work.

In the subsequent statement to the workers:

“Go ye also into the vineyard; and whatsoever is right, that shall ye receive.”

King James Version

We see that the landowner was a generous man. Yet we see this quality much more accentuated at the end, when the landowner actually paid them as much as if they had worked the full day. Here we have a glimpse at the extent of God’s generosity. No matter how late we come to the table, the feast is always plentiful.

The Parable of the Workers in the Vineyard stresses God’s limitless generosity to us all, without favouritism. And the money given in the parable symbolizes the reward – or eternal life – that will be given to everyone who works for him.

Here on Earth payment is directly proportional to the number of hours worked. Thus, the wages depicted in this parable were not exactly earthly wages. The treatment these workers received did not reflect that of human hands.

Jesus depicted this employer to help us understand that it is not human treatment or justice, but Divine Justice, that we will receive at the end of time. Everyone who responds to God will be treated as an equal, and it won't matter how early or late in our lives we respond to Him. We will be paid in full.

Perhaps this parable also points to the fact that God, the landowner, is always on the lookout for people to work for him, every day, throughout each hour of the day. In addition, it isn't so important to God when people respond to him; to him the only important thing is that they respond and do come to work.

It is worth noting here that some people respond to God early not because they are in any way better than others, but simply because they were introduced to God – or encountered God – at an earlier stage in their lives. As pointed out before, I was baptised and introduced to God on day one of my existence, but not everyone has had the same luck. Many people on this planet have never heard about God, nor have they ever reflected on the Scriptures. Will then God withhold his reward for the souls who encountered him and thus responded to him later in life? Of course not.

The last sentence in the parable, written below, is repeated many times by Jesus throughout the Gospels,

“So the last will be first, and the first will be last.” (NIV)

This sentence could point to the idea that the rejected, the neglected, and the ones who have been treated worst in this life will possibly be the ones God will favour at

the top of his list, whereas those who have enjoyed special treatment and privileges in life will be placed last in the queue. This is also a personal consolation to me. If we look around and see all the tragedies and miseries going on in the world: famines, earthquakes, wars, incurable diseases... we realise that it is more than fair that those exposed to them on the front-line should really be favoured in a subsequent existence. How could we explain otherwise all the torment and suffering in life if there is nothing at the end of it to counterbalance or compensate for it? Life would be meaningless, unbalanced, and utterly defective. And I do not think it is like that.

Furthermore, there are other stories in the Bible, such as “The Rich Man and Lazarus”, found in Luke 16: 19-31, which vividly describe this readjustment and ultimate fairness that will happen in the next life.

In other translations of the Bible, the last sentence in our parable is written as,

“So the last shall be first, and the first last: for many be called, but few chosen.”

King James Version

perhaps implying here that it was the last men – not the first ones who felt envious and jealous – who ultimately pleased the landowner.

To finish with, all the hired workmen in this parable were paid exactly what they were originally promised, one silver coin a day – or one denarius a day in other texts. Why wasn’t everybody happy then? As the landowner comes to say at the end:

“Why be envious because I am generous?”

Jealousy and envy are very negative human emotions and can be overwhelmingly corroding when felt in extremes. We have all experienced them to some degree or other. When it comes to generosity, if only we could look at the beautiful gesture and forget about ourselves... If only we were capable of rejoicing at the happiness of others!

